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Processing King Lear

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PROCESSING KING LEAR

By

Patric Michael Vendetti

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

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Processing King Lear

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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This thesis is the culmination of my scenic design work for William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* in the Howell Theatre at the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Within this paper I will look at the processes used to create the set design, the execution of the set design and the final product when seen in a fully realized production.

Dedication

“So what is this part you are playing in the show at school?”

“Oberon, Dad.”

“Who is this Oberon character?”

“He’s the King of the fairies!” I said very proudly.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure I can tell the guys at work that?”

A very loving thank you is due to my parents and all of my family for their never failing love and support even when they were unsure about this “theatre” thing. I could not have done it without them!

I must also thank the instructors and teachers that introduced me to this world of theatre at Omaha South High School 1987-1988, and Peru State College 1988-1992. You all gave this crazy dreamer of a South Omaha boy a chance to play and now I will go out and try to do the same for the students that I encounter.

I would like to thank the faculty and staff at the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film for taking in this older theatre technician and rekindling the creativity and wonder of theatre. I have learned so much working with all of you and I appreciate it.

A special loving thank you is due to my wife for her never ending patience through this process, even when the opening date of *King Lear* changed to a week before our wedding she never wavered. Thank You My Love!

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Chapter One: Introduction

It was in March of 2009 that I learned I was to design the set for *The Tragedy of King Lear*. The show was to be directed by Virginia Smith, lighting designed by Angela Sharman, costumes designed by Cecelia Sickler, and technical direction by Theron Seckington. This show was to be the thesis production for the graduate actors as well as the costume designer, technical director and myself. Being unfamiliar with the show, I first sought to familiarize myself with the settings and themes of the play as quickly as possible. I used internet searches, DVD's and the 1623 First Folio Edition of the play to get my first impressions.

The internet allowed me to quickly obtain a general synopsis of the play as well as a breakdown of the number of scene possibilities there were in the production. These initial searches on the internet also led me to the fact that *The Tragedy of King Lear* was based on mythology of King Lear in England. This was immediately intriguing for me and my love of history and Celtic society. Videos provided me with the main theme and plots of the show more quickly than reading would have. Then I turned my attention to the source via William Shakespeare's 1623 First Folio Edition.

At first the number of locations made me nervous because of the size limitations presented by the Howell Theatre and the very limited wing space as well as the limitations of the fly system. I also realized that Shakespeare had written the play to be produced in a single setting and that he used language through the actors to give locations and settings. This meant that it would be up to the director and I to decide how our

production would proceed. My job was to create a design that worked for the play, for the director and within the space. To accomplish these goals would require me to use all of the skills I had learned the previous two years of school and to acquire some new skills along the way. I looked at this project as a test of my ability to work in a collaborative manner, to create a product that was accomplishable as well as effective and to try to enhance the overall production of the show.

Chapter Two: The Design

In the first week of April there was an impromptu meeting between the director, lighting designer, costume designer and I. The meeting was a brief affair in the lobby of the Howell Theatre. Its purpose was to get the designers together with the director to discuss meeting times that would work for all of us. It was at this meeting that the director let us know that she was thinking about placing the show in the southern United States near or during the time of the Civil War. The director also mentioned that she was intrigued by the use of platforms to create a reveal of the actors as the Metropolitan Opera had used in *Madame Butterfly*. It was also at this time that the director let us know that she was pondering the use of black clad actors or “koken” to move and manipulate scenery.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I went back to the internet and researched visual images to go with what the director had said. My first search was to see how *Madame Butterfly* had used an upstage reveal. What I got was an image of a long horizontal line. This line separated a large cyclorama from the stairs that led downstage from the main horizontal platform. This structure left the actors in strong silhouette with a vast field of color both behind them on the cyclorama and in front of them washing down the stage. It was this strong visual image that the director was looking for.

Next I started to work on adjusting my initial ideas of a Celtic Lear into a Southern Lear. I read the script again with this new direction in mind. I began to look into southern plantation houses and what we might be able to work with as far as interior

and exterior structures as well as decorative elements. If we decided to play any scenes as interiors these elements would help guide me to ways of suggesting time and place for the audience. It was about this time that the idea of using koken began to guide some of my attention.

Using koken in the show perplexed me at first. How would these black clad figures be incorporated into the production? What kinds of looks would they create? Initially it was discussed that they would manipulate fabric to enhance the storm scene, carry on scenery or weapons, and carry on figures of soldiers to help fill in the numbers needed in some scenes. They were a strong oriental influence in a very un-oriental show, but the use of fabric did strike a chord with me. I started to think of panels of sheer materials that would diffuse light, create silhouettes and even become screens to project shadows and images on. I also began to think of swags of fabric both above the stage and draped on the stage. These ideas slowly started to weave their way into my designs, but first I had to create the space.

My initial sketches took me in a very organic direction. I was influenced by the imagery of rippled sand on the beach, rolling dunes, and the rounded drop-offs of rugged coastlines. My initial goals were to give the director as many usable levels as possible, reflect the imagery that I presented to the group, and give the space as many entrances and exits as possible. Up to this point we had not discussed scene changes in depth and how we were going to represent the different locations. It was with all of this in mind that I presented my first rough floor plan. The lines were very organic in nature taking on a curved and jagged form of the coastal images I selected. I also created many levels for

the actors to play upon. This initial floor plan was deemed too expensive to build due to the numerous curves and cut outs that would be required. The director's ideas for a center reveal were emphasized and different possibilities were discussed about entrances and exits. It was at this point that I brought up the option of extending the stage past the apron to bring the production closer to the audience as well as giving us more depth of stage to try and create the reveal the director desired. I was informed that technically we could remove a row of seats from the house if needed but, if that did become the case, we would also have to get it approved with the box office management. The director expressed that extending the stage would be a possibility for her as well. At this point I changed my approach to the show.

The first thing I needed to do was to see if we could even get a structure onto the Howell stage that would give us an upstage reveal and still leave us downstage playing space. It was here that I started to work directly with the floor plan and section drawings of Howell stage and took a break from developing the set conceptually. Working with the drawings and sightlines, I set about creating a six foot tall platform upstage with escape stairs going further upstage center. I looked at where I could place the six foot tall platform on stage so that a six foot tall actor on top of them would not be cut off by the sightlines from the upper balcony. I also needed to see how the upstage escape stairs would fit into the space. Ideally I wanted to create a structure that would allow the actors to escape directly upstage center, but at this time I was really looking at these drawings as feasibility studies and not actual design possibilities. It was with this in mind that I created several versions of escape stairs that led both directly up center stage as well as

off stage left and right. I also included examples of how stairs and rakes may project from the downstage side of the six foot tall platform.

By creating these drawings I began to see that, if we continued to move in the direction of this reveal, it would dominate the direction my design would take. Any hopes I may have briefly harbored that these drawings would convince the director that this reveal was not a good idea were quickly put to rest at the next production meeting. Instead I was met with a barrage of possibilities from every direction. Where entrances and exits could be worked in, how levels could be worked out, all the possibilities that may or may not work were all thrown at me in a flurry of voices from many areas of the production team and faculty. I was quickly overwhelmed. I felt that people were not waiting for me to come up with a design. I didn't want suggestions of how to work out the downstage structure at this point. I wanted them to see that the reveal would dominate the whole stage. It would hamstring any design possibilities just by the need to get actors safely from one point to another.

At this point in the design process, the director informed us that the play was to be set in the Napoleonic period in Britain. This decision had come out of meetings she had with the costume designer. They liked the color possibilities that this would allow for the men's military uniforms and the trains that this would allow them to use on the women. Once again I felt that I was being forced into directions that had nothing to do with where I wanted to go. I had a dilemma. What was I to do? I was quickly losing control of what was to be my thesis design and I didn't know how to deal with that fact. It was a spontaneous conversation with my scene design advisor that was to help me work

through my issues and continue to move forward from this point in my process. Through my conversation with her I was reminded of what a scenic designer's job really is.

Despite the fact that this was my thesis production, my job was to bring the director's vision of the show to the stage, not my personal vision. My visions would influence the directions the design would take, but they were not the only influences on the set design.

I was once again reminded that this was a collaborative process with many voices combining to become one. My previous theatre design experiences all took place in smaller environments with very little time to develop a concept and few people that were able to give input into the process. For *King Lear*, I was surrounded by many creative and talented people who were merely voicing their thoughts in order to help me further develop my set and my skills as a designer. It was this conversation that helped me release my anger and once again focus on moving forward.

It was not long after this conversation that an idea struck me. If the visual look of trains of fabric was strong enough to give us a new time period to place the show in, then maybe it was a strong enough visual image to work into the sets concept as well. I had begun to think of long sections of silk flowing down from the flies and gathering on stage. Painted details on the stage would then mimic the fabric flowing down our rake to cascade over the apron and onto the house floor. I was very excited about this idea and proceeded to make a quick sketch or two. The imagery of yards of flowing fabric worked into my visions of fabric panels to project diffused silhouettes and other shadowy images upon. This design concept tied into the strong visual element that the director liked about the trains. I met with one of the department's scene painting students and the scene

painting instructor to see if they thought such a paint scheme could be accomplished successfully by our students. The student painter stated that she thought it would be possible, but that since she was graduating that semester she was not sure who would be available to undertake such a project next fall. The scene painting instructor said that it would be possible and that we would cross that bridge if and when we got there. With these assurances in mind I was prepared to propose the idea to the director.

I met with the director to express my ideas of working the imagery of the trains into the set itself. While she thought the ideas interesting she felt that they would make the set too feminine for *King Lear*. She did like the idea of using fabric, just not in a form that mimicked the trains and capes of the period. The director suggested that I look into other ways to decorate the set such as crowns, tapestries, or even impressionistic grass. I expressed some other possibilities that I had for working fabric into the design. These included the use of swags and panels that would both fly in and out as well as traveling in and out. An 8mm black Habotai silk from Rupert, Gibbon & Spider had piqued my interest. It provided a silky shiny look when light hit it from the front and also had a wonderful diffused translucence when light was directed at it from behind. This translucent quality allowed it to function as a version of scrim by hiding things behind it until we wished them revealed. The translucence also allowed the cyclorama to remain visible behind it thus maintaining the large field of colored light behind the actors as much as possible. When swagged, the silk also draped beautifully. At one point it had been suggested by the director that the koken could use fabric strips to wave about the actors in representation of the storm. I felt that the black silk would perform this task

well. Even with the idea of trains draping the stage behind me, I still wanted to try and incorporate the use of fabric into the design. The director agreed that this was an idea that we should investigate.

This same meeting with the director also produced some other very important insights. Using my laptop computer I sat down with the director in the lobby of the Howell Theatre and took her step by step through both the section drawing and the floor plan. I had placed the section view directly above the floor plan so that she could more easily see how things were lined up in both views. In this manner I was able to walk the director through different sightline issues. The director stated that this process was very helpful to her and that she had never had a designer take her through the process in this manner before. Through this method it was decided that we should look at a taller main platform so that heads could be more readily hidden from the lower section of the audience when the actors made their entrances. That meant that the six foot tall platform was to get even taller. I explained that this would cut off the view of some of the balcony and it was decided that I should make some more drawings to see exactly how many audience members this would affect. We also discussed the idea of making the apron extension curved rather than square and both agreed that this was a good option.

Once we had discussed the physical and decorative issues of the set I asked the director how she felt about set pieces. How did the director feel we should handle scenery like tables, chairs, and stockades? It was at this point that the director reinforced her views that she wanted to work as minimally as possible. She wanted the show to flow and not be bogged down with set changes. Since the majority of the scenes could

take place as exterior scenes that would allow us to keep set dressings to a minimum. The director was not interested in having scenic elements suggesting the different locations for every scene. Anything that did change from scene to scene would have to do so quickly.

It was at this stage in the process that we all disbanded for the summer. The tasks before me were to figure out how to raise the level of our main platform to better hide actors behind it, how to incorporate the set into the Napoleonic period, and how to address any scenic changes that would be necessary. What free time I had between painting my house, planning a wedding, and directing all the necessary technical elements for an all girls fine arts center in Lenox, Massachusetts, I used to continue combing the script for clues that would lead me to any ways of tying the set into the Napoleonic period in Britain. This time I had moved onto the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *The Tragedy of King Lear*. No official version of the script had been selected up to this point. Over the summer break I also happened upon a graphic novel version of *King Lear* illustrated by Ian Pollock. While this version did little in assisting me in my designs it did provide a well needed break from the ruts I found myself in during the summer and gave me yet another valuable reading of the script.

Upon our return to school in late August, we were greeted with several insights into our production of *King Lear*. One of these insights was the selection of a script. We were given copies of the script from an unknown internet source with the only distinguishing markings being “December, 1997 [Etext #1128] 1606 *The Tragedy of King Lear*.” Two other decisions would lead to the cutting of the idea of fabric panels and the

use of shadow images on them. First, we were informed that the koken were cut because no good solution had arisen to enable them to be included in the show. Second, the director stated that all oriental influences were no longer on the table and that the play would be firmly established in Britain. The director was also thinking of the possibility that the opening scene in Act I could be located in gardens around Lear's palace. I was excited that I may possibly find some imagery to connect the set to the chosen time period in which we were setting our production.

These decisions would have several affects on my designs. The elimination of the koken would leave no one to manipulate the shadow images on panels of fabric. This removed the main element that necessitated the use of fabric panels. Early in the design process, one of the other jobs of the koken was going to be to manipulate strips of fabric to create a stormy atmosphere around the actors. This meant that there would be no one available to manipulate fabric pieces to suggest the storm. The director informed the design team that all possibilities for the storm were back on the table. A portion of the show that spans from Act II Scene 4 through Act III Scene 4 all takes place during a thunderous storm sequence. This was a major element to be figured out. That is why the lighting designer, technical director, and myself planned to have a storm meeting.

Before this meeting, I met with the school's scene shop foreman to ascertain exactly what scenic devices we had at our disposal to create storm-like effects. I learned that we had several varieties of fans available, several types of haze machines, cold flow foggers that mimicked dry ice fog, water misters, and even a carbon arc light could be used to create lightning effects. Almost immediately I ruled out the misters because of

the hazard of having water on the stage. We were looking at a multi-tiered set with lots of steps and a rake and I felt that traction would be a major concern even with texture added to the set. There was also the fact that with all the steps and levels in the set it would be too difficult to incorporate a drainage system into the set. One suggestion I had was to reincorporate the use of strips of fabric by suspending them from fly lines throughout the space. Then they could be blown by fans from off stage to give the audience a visual element to represent the storm while giving the actors something to play off of and around. I believed that these blowing strips combined with haze, fog, and lights would create a very dramatic storm scene that would be safe for the actors as well as give the lighting designer many lighting possibilities to explore. The storm strips would be a larger representation of the director's earlier idea of the scene involving fabric and the koken. After discussing these ideas with the lighting designer and technical director, it was agreed upon that this would be the way to proceed.

At this time the final structure of the set began to materialize. After having located the best position of the main platform and determining that the best overall height was at seven feet six inches tall, I was left with figuring out what would happen downstage of this structure. I began to make quarter inch scale white models to explore different possibilities. I created two platform layouts. One was symmetrical and incorporated multiple steps down, as well as a raked platform that went from the proscenium to the apron extension. The second was a non symmetrical grouping of platforms that also included a rake that was set downstage of the proscenium. When I presented these options to the director she was more favorable towards the symmetrical

version. She said that actor movement patterns were smoother on the symmetrical version and that it was more appealing to the eye. We both agreed that this was a good direction in which to proceed. At this point I gave the technical director a preliminary set of drawings to see how close we may be on budgeting.

Now that the basic structure was moving into a more concrete stage I began to work on refining the structure. This consisted of working on escape platforms and stairs, looking into masking placement and laying out legs and borders. While laying out the borders I tried to think of where the lighting designer may need to put lights in order to light all the various levels that I was giving to her. I wanted to be as proactive as possible to avoid any conflicts that often arise between scenic and lighting designs. I knew that lighting was going to have to create some electrics and I tried to plan ahead. By doing this I also discovered that Howell Theatre has a one foot six inch void in the fly system caused by a large concrete support beam that runs from stage right to stage left and runs between the counterweight fly system and the Vortec fly system. Naturally this occurred right where I was trying to fly some masking legs. This discovery led to a meeting with the technical director about having masking that did not have to be attached to the fly system for support. Because I still wanted the masking to be fabric and it now had to be self supporting I suggested the idea of using our stock duvetyn covered flats as legs. By doing this I would still acquire masking with the softness of fabric and get a fabric that would minimize light bounce at the same time. This was agreed upon and the issue of the masking legs was resolved.

Another discovery that I made while laying out the masking details was that the apron extension created horrible sightlines for the people in the balcony. A patron's view of the show from the back of the balcony would give the audience members in those seats an upper torso view of any actors that moved down to the edge of the extended apron. After discussing this with the director it was decided that it was unfair for the balcony patrons to have hindered views of both the upper and lower platforms. So the apron extension was cut and the rake was modified to accommodate the change.

With the platforming of the set solidified up to this point I delivered the newest quarter inch scale drawings to the director. During this visit the director mentioned that she had missed the fact that she would need a wagon of some sort on which to bring out the bodies of Regan and Goneril in the final scene. At first this idea worried me because I was not sure if the terrace like arrangement of the platforms had enough room to allow such a wagon to be used. I also was not sure that there was enough backstage space to allow the setting up and loading of a wagon without being in view of a large portion of the audience. I told the director that I would look into adapting the stage right escape platforming at the forty-five inch high level and see what I could fit on there.

That weekend I created what was to be my fourth and last quarter inch scale white model of the set. The model and the latest drawings were presented at the last production meeting in August. With the latest version of the floor plan came the question of whether or not there was enough room for the stage manager to call the show from the normal position off stage right. It was said by a staff member that the stage manager could call show from another location if needed and that this had been done before. I also

mentioned that I had double checked those measurements and that I thought there would be just enough room for the stage manager to remain in the traditional position. I decided that I should look into other possibilities just in case what was drawn on the paper did not match with what ended up on stage. In the end the stage manager was able to remain in the traditional location with the addition of a railing to protect her from being stepped on by the actors.

As the set continued to progress, I continued to look for some imagery or concept to connect the structure to the time period. One idea that started to form was inspired by the director asking if we needed some sort of crest or crown to represent King Lear. The director was referring to some sort of set piece to help establish the opening scene as taking place in King Lear's palace, but it dawned on me that I could incorporate it into the paint scheme on the rake. I was able to find many crests for the town of Leicester in England. Leicester was the town that was established by the actual King Lear so that made a logical starting point. Once I had tracked down several examples I started to think about painting King Lear's crest onto the down stage rake. The surface of the rake was going to need some adornment because of its angle to the audience anyway, so why not apply a crest for King Lear. This would give a more royal atmosphere to the opening scene as if it took place in King Lear's great hall. Then I began to wonder if we might be able to paint the crest in a manner that would allow it to be highlighted for the opening scene but then fade into the background for the rest of the show. When I mentioned this possibility to the director she said that she did not like the militaristic nature of a crest and she did not like the idea of it being visible the entire show. The director felt that the

show was not just about King Lear, but King Lear and Gloucester. She suggested that I look in the direction of a tapestry or even something like a Celtic knot or tree.

With our production meeting on the second of September we took one more look at the overall structure of the set platforming. Once again the director voiced her approval for all of the structure upstage of the proscenium. The director did however ask about the ease of access onto the rake for the actors. I explained that I felt with a maximum height at twenty-seven inches the whole rake was fairly accessible, but that I could look at some further modifications to improve the access. This led to me making the rake narrower to provide more of a playing space on the stage left and stage right sides on the stage level. I also would create a one foot wide step at the twenty-seven inch high level that then stepped down to the start of the rake at a new height of eighteen inches total. The next adaptation to the platforming was to create a crossover tunnel under the seven foot six inch tall platforming structure. This would allow a hidden crossover space that would eliminate the need of the actors to cross over through the scene shop. These were to be the last design changes to the on stage platform structure of the set.

I have discovered in the past that Vectorworks does not always create the cleanest or most accurate drawings. I have found that lines and objects that I had drawn to measurements like four feet long would later dimension out to three feet eleven and five eighths inches long. It has also been my experience that objects tend to be shifted very easily so that what looked like two corners meeting perfectly on point will become two corners slightly overlapping when you zoom in to view them. These may seem like small

issues in the overall construction of the set, but my years of experience as a technical director has taught me that all these little errors can add up to larger issues. This is especially true when the set is squeezed into a space as tightly as my set was placed onto the Howell stage. That is why I redrew the floor plan once again from scratch. I wanted every dimension to be the distance I intended. I wanted all junction points of lines or objects to be correct so that there would be no discrepancies when snapping to them. It was through this process that I became more familiar with the use of classes and layers in the Vectorworks program. I learned how to organize items and objects so that I could snap to them without actually manipulating them. In this manner I was now able to work on my drawings without the fear of accidentally manipulating objects that I had already created. By doing this I was able to create the most accurate and reliable drawing I could for the technical director. I had hopefully eliminated any errors that may arise due to inaccurate measurements off of the drawing.

At the same time I was creating my latest drawing of the floor plan and section drawings, I began to break down the properties needs and to develop what the flies might look like for the various scenes. First, I read the script and started to note everything that I could think of as a possible property. Then I took the properties list and noted everything from that list that I felt would need to be designed. Stockades, dead body cart and flags distinguishing the different families were major items to look into as well as possible chairs for King Lear and Gloucester to sit in. Other items of possible design choices would be the use of torches. The script often announces someone's entrance with the use of torches. Having experienced issues with being able to use live torches on

Howell stage, and preferring the design choices that the period made available, I was leaning towards the use of lanterns rather than torches. Another item that is called for in Act I Scene 1 was the map of the kingdom. My first question was will the map be hand held or a set piece. Conversations with the director would make this a hand held map that would never be seen by the audience. Later, while watching a rehearsal I was to discover that the way the map was being used did make it visible to the audience so I did design a period map of Britain for the show. Eventually it was decided that the flags, also known as colors, of the different families would be carried on by actors. I now had an assistant set designer, so I assigned the task of researching stocks, carts, and the flags of each family required to her.

At our next production meeting I handed out my list of properties, gave the director the finished white model as well as a completed floor plan and section drawing. I gave silk samples to the lighting designer and talked to the costume design instructor about dyeing silks. The costume design instructor said that it was possible to dye silk, but that it would probably look streaky and uneven when dyed in large quantity. I was actually looking for a very uneven look to the fabric so I thought that would be workable. The costume design instructor also confirmed several possible sources of affordable silk that I had been looking into. During the same production meeting I set up a time later in the week to sit down with the director and proceed scene by scene through the show to establish looks that worked for us both. Until this point I had lots of ideas for use of fabrics throughout the show, but I was not able to make any definitive decisions on my own. At the end of the production meeting the director announced that all of the

designers and the director should bring a concept statement with us to our next meeting. We, as a group, had been working without a unifying concept up to that point.

Friday of that week I met with the director. I was under the impression that we would work our way through the show scene by scene and start to establish needs and looks. Unfortunately the director did not have time for a lengthy meeting going scene by scene. Several things were established during the forty-five minutes that we did meet. We discussed the different possible uses of fabric in the show. Swags of fabric with strings of lanterns would accent the opening scene. Silk panels upstage could help mask the actors from the balcony seating as they approached the center reveal. The director confirmed that she liked the idea of blowing strips of fabric encompassing the stage to help represent the storm. We also decided that we would have a total of three flags for the battle scenes consisting of Albany, Cornwall, and France. Other properties discussed were the use of a joint stool and cushions in the farmhouse scene as well as the possibility of the chairs used for King Lear and Gloucester being identical or even the same chair. Finally our meeting confirmed that any sort of crest on the rake was out and that I was to look in the direction of some Celtic influence.

The following weekend I started to research Celtic ornamentation while trying to piece together a concept statement. My struggle became how to create a concept statement when a major portion of the set is already designed. Was it the responsibility of the director to begin this process with the overriding concept for the show? How was I supposed to conceptualize now in the middle of the design process? It was in a state of absolute frustration and confusion that I had an impromptu meeting with one of my scene

design faculty members about the concept statement. My discussions with her would eventually walk me through the scene design process that had brought me to this point. How we had come up with the idea of a reveal through the director's experience of *Madame Butterfly*. How the ideas about using fabric had developed out of an earlier idea of koken and the Asian influence they had led to. She deduced that I was really grasping at straws in hopes that the director would eventually like something that I had presented rather than developing a set design based off of a beginning concept and developing it from that beginning. Just being able to see this from someone else's point of view was enough to free me once again. I was able to let go of my frustrations and let inspiration happen to me once more.

That inspiration was to come to me through my research of ancient ruins in Britain as well as rock carvings. Initially I started looking for ancient symbols to adorn the set with. This eventually led to me looking up images of the tree of life and eventually to tree of life rock carvings. One of the most inspiring images was to appear on the first search page of the latter of those two searches. A spiral rock carving from the Cornwall region of Britain would eventually become the decoration I had long been searching for and would be painted on the surface of the downstage rake. My first impression was an ancient tree of life, but the director immediately noted its labyrinth like qualities. Further inspiration would be found by researching stone slabs as well as Hadrian's Wall and other ruins in England. These images not only became my inspiration for the look of the set, they became the connecting pieces I needed to create a concept statement.

My concept became the following statement, “ For me the platform structure represents the past. King Lear takes place on top of the remains from Britain’s past. That past peeks out from underneath moss, grass and dirt, but it is under there. I believe this is representative of Shakespeare basing his play on previous tales of King Lear and Gloucester. The platform structure also represents the heights of power that Regan, Goneril, and Edmund are striving for. It is the hierarchal social structures of their world.” This concept statement was presented to the director along with five images of ruins, three images of stone slabs, an image of lanterns, and one image of the rock carving. The director approved the concept statement and images immediately. It was with much relief and even joy that I left the office enthusiastic about continuing my work.

My next major task in this process was to finalize how we were going to use fabric in the show. I met with the director and talked about the fabric being a visual representation of the mental and social conditions of the play. I felt that the clean lines of the swags in the opening scene along with the straight lines of the silk panels throughout Acts I and II represented the order in their world. When we moved into the third act the clean lines of the fabric were replaced with tattered and torn strips of fabric being blown about the actors by fans. While in Acts IV and V the family flags would be representative of how the characters were trying to restructure their lives after the turmoil of Act III.

In Act I we agreed to use two fly lines for swags. These swags would be placed on line sets eleven and nineteen and would be in position for the first two scenes of Act I. We also agreed that two silk panels that traveled in on line set seventeen would be in

from the first scene in Act I to the last scene in Act II. For Act III I asked the director if she had plans to separate the storming exterior scenes from the less storm-like interior scenes. I suggested that it would not make sense to have the fabric strips in position during the interior scenes and that I thought if she could block the interior scenes downstage of the proscenium while blocking the storm scenes upstage of the proscenium the strips of fabric would work much better. The director agreed this was the best plan and we went on to look at how exactly we thought we would use the strips. Originally I had developed a plan of layering and removing strips as we progressed throughout the act. The director thought we should simplify this idea and have all the strips in to begin with. Then when we progressed to the hovel scene we would add an additional fly. Next, when we came to the farmhouse scene we would remove all the strips downstage and stage right. Then to finish the show in Acts IV and V each individual army would bring on their colors giving us a through line of fabric use for the entire show. With this meeting we had solidified our use of flies and placement of set pieces for the entire show. I could continue to develop individual fly pieces and the director had the information she would need to start blocking.

The last week of September was a busy week. Monday morning the technical director had not had a chance to look at the latest version of drawings. The lighting designer gave me a copy of her drawings and what her electrical needs were. We also discussed the benefits and drawbacks to both strip lights and cyc lights when used to light a cyclorama. I explained that I preferred the wash I was able to achieve with cyc lights whereas strip lights always created scallops of color to me. After reviewing the lighting

designer's drawings I was worried that she was taking over the downstage fly lines with electrics while limiting the available fly lines for storm strips. I e-mailed the lighting designer to propose some changes. If I were to move a border to line one would she be able to consolidate the electrics she had on lines four and six into a single electric on line five? I also asked if line eight was going to have any ellipsoidals pointing upstage that might interfere with strips on line nine?

Tuesday I met with the lighting designer to discuss the possible changes. We looked at the drawings and pleaded our cases. Fortunately all the changes were agreed upon without any troubles. The lighting designer said she would make the changes to her drawings and look at all the new angles. For the next three days I worked on developing paint elevations. Friday I saw the technical director pulling platforms from stock for the show. I asked the technical director again, if he had gotten a chance to look over the drawings to see if anything had changed before pulling stock platforms out of storage? The technical director's response was that he had not looked at the drawings yet, but that it did not matter because they just needed work for the students to do.

During the weekend I continued to work on paint elevations while working to get the actual flies drawn for all the strips and swags. I was having difficulty working out the strips until I decided to work outside of Vectorworks. I printed out drawings of the exact height and width each fly could be and then worked out the exact placement of strips on the paper. When I had achieved the look I was looking for in pencil I was then able to scan in the images, adjust them to scale, then I could draw over the images on the computer. When I stopped trying to force myself to draw the strip flies in Vectorworks I

freed myself up to actually create them. With the flies now included in the elevations I e-mailed the most current version of the drawings to the technical director.

The first full week of October was focused on finishing up paint elevations of the floor and the platform facings. The technical director confirmed receiving the latest version of the drawings on Monday. On Wednesday the technical director asked if he could adapt some of the platforming to better compensate for stock. I said that I agreed. He stated that the plan had changed more than he thought it would, but that he thought it helped improve actor flow. By Thursday I had completed my paint elevations of the floor and a paint elevation of the platform facings. Thursday evening I presented the research, drawings, renderings and model to the cast before their first read through. On Friday I met with my scene design advisor and the director to get their feelings about the paint elevations. The director liked the direction the floor paintings went, but wanted the symbol on the rake to be more organic. The director also felt that the wall stones on the platform facings were too square and clean, she wanted them to be more worn down and ruff hewn. My scene design advisor thought that the paintings were well done and that the color palette would work well with the palette the costume designer had chosen.

Monday, October twelfth can be described as the first day that true drama struck my design process. At two in the afternoon the technical theatre instructor called me into his office to give me the bad news that all platforms over six feet in height needed to have railings on them to meet safety code. That would mean that I would have to put railings on my seven foot six inch tall platforms. By doing this we would have eliminated the look of the actors silhouetted against the cyclorama. This was one of the key reasons for

designing the set as I had. After a brief conference with the technical theatre instructor and the scene design instructor we confirmed that this was the rule and we needed to follow it. I went immediately to the director's office to inform her of the development. I explained to the director what I had learned and tried to assure her that we would figure out a solution on way or another. Because the director had a meeting scheduled at that exact moment we went our separate ways with the agreement to meet up at four that afternoon to hash out a solution. During the interim that followed I realized that I had two large voids of space upstage right and left of my tallest platform. It seemed logical to me that if I were to create two platforms in those spaces at four feet high then my tallest platform would be three feet six inches away from the furthest horizontal surface. After conferring once again with the technical theatre instructor we confirmed that this would indeed solve the issue. When the director arrived at four that afternoon we had both come up with the same solution and were very excited that we did not have to adapt the set.

During the Wednesday production meeting the production manager asked how the set and the costumes were connected. On Thursday, during a meeting with the director, the subject came up again. The director mentioned that the production manager had asked her again after the meeting how the two designs were connected and how the set design connected with the Napoleonic period. I explained to the director that this was the reason I had had such a hard time coming up with a concept. The structure was designed to give the director certain looks that she desired without any consideration with how that might fit into an overall concept of the show. I reminded the director that we were not

trying to represent any one location with the set. Because the majority of the play took place in exterior scenes we would have to add architectural elements to show a time period. I explained that there were very few ways to create exterior locations that actually give a time period. The director agreed and stated that it had not bothered her up to that point and that she was not really bothered by it then. The only thing to develop out of this dilemma was that I switched the fabric for the swags in the opening scene from the black Habotai silk to a royal blue crepe backed satin that I felt better connected with the colors of King Lear's costuming. I also adapted the lanterns on the swag fly to more closely resemble lanterns a King may have had during the Napoleonic time period.

By Friday the twenty-third of October I had handed in prop drawings to the properties master, gotten the final approval for the strip and swag flies from the director, and had the costumer double check my yardages. That weekend I began to create a rendering for the show.

Monday, October twenty-sixth, the load in of the set had begun. The structure was massive. Tuesday I stayed to watch rehearsal and loved the way the actors looked on the set. The levels created such great images with people on them. By watching rehearsals on Tuesday I discovered that many scenes in act three were not blocked as we had planned. Instead of having scenes that do not take place during the storm being blocked on the apron they are now blocked on the three foot level upstage of the proscenium. I felt that this may hinder how the strips would be used during performances. After discussing it with the director we agreed to see how it looked and make our decision then. The director and I also discussed the use of flags and lanterns.

The director stated that she was certain about the need of three flags and that she would give me a final answer on her choice of pole styles. Concerning lanterns, the director said that she was not as worried about lantern styles as she was about having them flicker.

Wednesday brought another production meeting and with it another issue brought forth by the production manager. He stated that it would not be possible to move the stage manager to another location on stage. I replied that I did not feel it was necessary, but that we had been told that it was a viable possibility earlier in the process. I told the production manager that I would address the issue immediately after the meeting. Once I took a closer look of the platforming off stage right I saw that where the platforming ended and where the drawings showed it should end did not match up. The platforms ended farther onstage than I had designed. Upon discovering this I also saw that by simply moving the escape stairs further off stage right we could give the stage manager more room and not have to make any drastic changes. I explained this to the technical director who agreed to think about it.

On Thursday October twenty-ninth, I discovered just how incorrectly the platform structure had been installed. It was during shop hours that the graduate student in charge of the paint crew brought to my attention that there was an extra step in the structure that was not on the drawing. The seventy- two inch tall platform was placed in a manner that created a step that protruded five inches out from a facing with which it was supposed to have been flush. The painter and I talked about how to adapt the paint treatment and about what texture they were going to use for the rake to give the actors more traction.

The fact that the actors needed more traction on the rake made me glad that we were not going to add water to the storm scene after all. After that I went back to work in the light shop for the afternoon.

During the rest of that afternoon the error with the platforms kept nagging at me. So I waited until shop hours were completed at five thirty that afternoon and went back up to the stage to check all the measurements of the platforms. To my dismay I discovered that all of the platforms had been installed incorrectly. What was supposed to have been a four foot wide platform actually measured three feet nine inches wide. Another four foot wide platform really measured five feet wide and a four foot six inch wide platform measured four feet three inches wide. All of the stairs that were supposed to be one foot six inches wide varied from one foot three inches to one foot eleven inches wide. The main problem all of this was to create was that all of the masking measurements were now going to be incorrect. With as little offstage space as the set had this was going to create horrible sightline issues. I informed the technical director of his error that same evening so that he was aware that changes would need to be made to adjust masking. On Friday I met with my scene design advisor and she confirmed that nothing could be done at this point to adjust for the errors and that other than the sightline issues the audience would never know. With that resolved we continued to move forward in the process of designing *King Lear*.

While work continued on the set I proceeded to finalize pieces of the drawings. I learned several new techniques while working on the perspective rendering. I had already created a perspective drawing by hand that mainly consisted of a skeleton of the

platforms. Next I scanned my original painter's renderings and the symbol for the rake into my computer. Then using Photoshop, I was able to manipulate my paint elevations into the skeleton frame of the platforms in perspective. Then I added in the symbol on the rake to complete the structure of the set. This would prove very useful by allowing me to adjust how prominent the symbol on the rake was without having to create more than one drawing. I would eventually finish the rendering with figures of King Lear and Cordelia. Photoshop also proved valuable for creating the map in the opening scene and eventually the three flags.

To finish up the first week of November I designed the chair to be used for King Lear and Gloucester. The only thing left to finalize were the three flags and those were waiting for the director to make the final decision as to how they were carried on. Even though this decision had been made on several occasions it was once again up in the air. I presented the two choices to the director one last time. One choice was a flag held on a single pole. That would mean that the actor bearing the flag would have to hold it away from their body at an angle that would allow the flag to drape in a flatter manner than if it was held upright. The second choice was a "T" pole pattern that would allow the flag to hang flat to the audience even when held in a vertical position. The "T" style pole was chosen thus allowing us to make a prototype and get our final flag measurements. Fortunately I had created the flags in Photoshop and could quickly alter them as needed.

On Friday November 6th the first silk gauze strips were hung. This was to be a mediocre moment for me. What was flown in the air that day did little to resemble the drawings I had made. The strips were too narrow and too few creating more of an

anorexic effect. When weights were added to the strips to make them more manageable when flown they curled up on themselves making them even thinner. Another reason for this curling affect may have been that the silk gauze was not pre-shrunk prior to cutting out the strips and adding the color. Pre-shrinking silk before painting it was a process I would not learn until I researched painting on silk for the flags. Unfortunately that was to be too late to help with the storm strips. I was not very pleased with my initial impression of the storm strips and thought that when everything else was completed I could then help the technical director make them look better.

The last week of the build was now under way and there were several pieces to work on. The satin swags and the black traveling panels both remained to be created and installed and the strips needed to be reworked. This seemed like a workable thing at the time.

On Saturday before technical rehearsal I received a call from the stage manager. They had used the storm strips in rehearsal Friday night and the director was not happy with them. I immediately called the director to find out exactly what was wrong with the strips. The strips were not blowing nearly enough, they were too thin and too few and they did not reach the floor. I told the director that I was disappointed in them as well and that there were several possibilities that might make them better. First they were too heavy for the fan to blow. Instead of having two fans blowing from the wings off stage right as originally designed there was only one because the second had gotten moved downstage of the proscenium to help with the hazer. With that being the case our other option would be to get lighter weights on the strips themselves. The director and I also talked about

combining several of the flies together to create a fuller individual fly. I also explained that I had the painters paint all the gauze we had purchased with the express intention to use the extra material to fill in where parts of the flies may have been thin and that we could use those to try and help the overall look. We also talked about making the fly that was to represent the hovel stand out more so I explained that we might be able to do so by using some of the leftover black silk in combination with the strips. It was decided that we would try to improve what we had.

Sunday, November fifteenth technical rehearsal and I could not believe how much was not done on the set and props. Set wise, there were still no satin swags in the air let alone sewn in the shop. The black silk panels that traveled in upstage were not centered or tied off offstage so that they could not be pulled tight in their fully on position. The leading bottom corners had not been weighted so they billowed upstage when they traveled on. Properties were in nearly the same state as some of the scenic elements. The actors were still using a torn piece of brown paper for the map instead of the one I had printed for them. Not even prototype flags were done. The stool, blanket and cushion for the farmhouse scene were still rehearsal props and the lanterns were not completed. The stockade that had been built weeks ago was still not completed.

At the dinner break the director and I had a conversation about the missing or poorly produced fly pieces. Neither one of us were pleased with the looks of the storm strips. I told the director that I was willing to work on making the strips better, but that I did not want to take people away from finishing things like the swags and I was not sure when those would get done. The director stated that she liked the structure of the set so

well that she believed that it could work on its own without the flies. I agreed with her. We then decided that since we did not have enough fan power to move the strips as we had planned that we would cut the strips and try to use them to create a singular hovel fly.

Over the dinner break I pulled a new stool, blanket and cushion from the prop attic. I also went out and purchased a pebbled plastic sheet to create the glass for the lanterns. When I returned I cut the plastic sheet into three pieces and installed them in the one lantern that we had at the time. I replaced the torn brown paper that had been used for the map with the printed version and printed out several more copies. I also worked on the silk panels in an attempt to get them to work better. It was to be in vain, for after the rehearsal ended the director cut the silk panels as well.

Monday I redesigned the hovel fly to incorporate the strips and silk panels that we had cut the day before. I got the new design approved by the director and informed the technical director to remove all of the strip flies and the silk panels. I explained that I would create the new hovel fly so that the technical director could concentrate on the swags. I then went to meet with the properties master. Seeing how far behind he was I asked him if I could get the shop foreman to correct the errors on King Lear's chair and weld in the bar that had been requested at tech rehearsal. The properties master was happy with this solution, so it was done. I also realized that the properties master did not have a plan for having the flags produced so I told him I would research some last minute possibilities. After contacting several people about plotting machines for fabric and flag makers in town both professional and amateur I soon realized that we were forced to

create the flags in house. Resigning myself to the fact I went to the hardware store to purchase some extra steel for the chair and went back to the shop to create the hovel fly.

By five-thirty that afternoon I had delivered the steel to the shop foreman along with the chair and combined all of the strip flies and one of the silk panels into a new hovel fly. When I took the piece on stage I saw that there was one of the three satin swags hung in the air. It looked awful. The fabric was beautiful, but despite the patterns and the instructions in the curtain making book that I had shared with the technical director, the swag just looked bad. I decided that it did not pay to mess with it right then, but that I should get the hovel fly into the air. When I had hung the hovel fly the director arrived and came to the stage to look at the progress. The director said that she thought the hovel fly looked better and that we would take a look at it under the lights that night. Like me, the director was not thrilled about the swag. I assured her that the property shop supervisor had given me his word that he could make it look great tomorrow. Despite these assurances the swags were cut that night. The hovel fly was also cut after a fly system error did not bring the fly in during rehearsal. The director said that she really liked the scene with a bare stage.

During the rehearsal that Monday night I saw that the upstage masking flats had not been installed evenly off of center. As I had moved around the audience during the rehearsal I also came to find out that there were many major sightline issues with the masking placements. When rehearsal was over I informed the technical director that the swags had been cut and that that would free him up to fix the masking issues on Tuesday. The technical director asked “Why is everything being cut?” I explained to him that

“they were cut because they were not done and what had been done had not been done well.” With that I went to the prop shop to test samples for painting on silk. After many samples of trying to paint on silk I decided to call it a night and check with the faculty in the morning about painting on silk for the flags.

Tuesday morning I was back at school to talk with the two scene design instructors about painting the flags on silk. Neither one of the instructors had any experience with painting on silk so I decide that it was too risky of an option. Instead of the ornate flags I had designed I would find fabric to make two colored flags for each family. That having been decided I proceeded to the scene shop to create the wood portions of King Lear’s chair. When I had completed that, I went to the fabric store and picked out six satin fabrics to make the flags out of. When I returned to the University I met with the properties supervisor and drew up what I wanted the new flags to look like. He said he understood and started cutting out panels. Once the panels were all cut we went down to the costume shop and proceeded to create the three flags for the show. That night at rehearsal nothing was cut!

Wednesday found me and the properties supervisor working together to create the blue satin swags that had been cut previously. After we had created one we called in the director. The director agreed that it was much better than the previous one and that she would look at it during the preview performance that night. I then called up the lighting designer to see how the swags would affect her lights since we had not seen them up before. When I saw the lighting designer hesitate to give us her approval I knew that the swags were interfering with her lights so I gave her a second option. I suggested that we

cut the downstage set of swags because they were blocking out the front light for the characters on the top platform, but we would keep the upstage swags and lanterns to help frame the opening scene. It was agreed that this was the best option and with that the last remaining flying element was saved.

Chapter Three: Conclusion

Opening night had finally arrived. I have worked on a fair number of productions since my undergraduate degree, but this was one of the few productions that I have worked on and attended as an audience member. My experience with *The Tragedy of King Lear* was enjoyable. With all the struggles to get to that point just to see the production on its feet and creating a life of its own was exhilarating. The audience's reaction to the size of the structure was often audible in the house. The images the director was able to create with the actors on all those levels was intriguing. The lights played off of the surfaces and coloring of the set just as I had hoped. I knew that no one would know that certain scenic elements had been cut so that did not bother me. I was pleased with the platform structure and knew that it could stand on its own, otherwise I may have been more upset about the cuttings.

I may never know exactly what caused the flying scenic elements to fail. Maybe they had been part of an earlier vision I had for the set and should have been let go when the tokens were cut. Maybe I was not able to fully conceive them early enough in the process to have them realized on the set. The platform structure could have been installed incorrectly because I did not give the technical director the dimensioning that he needed. Maybe I should have put more pressure on the technical director to get things accomplished in a timelier manner. What I do know is that I will have to be more diligent in the future and do twice as much as I think it will need to get it done correctly.

In the end, though, it is theatre and as such it has a way of working itself out and becoming the production that it was meant to be.

Now that the set has been struck and another show has already been produced on those same boards I can say that I am proud of my work on this show. I felt that the structure created wonderful imagery with the actors in the space, it gave the lighting designer a great pallet to work off, and the costume designer's work looked great with my set as its background. The director's reactions and encouragement lead me to believe that she was pleased with the outcome as well. My scene design advisor also seems to believe that it was a successful production. In the end that is what matters. That the people you have worked with have enjoyed themselves, learned something along the way, and put their full heart into the project. I feel that that is what happened with *The Tragedy of King Lear* at the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film in the month of November, 2009, and I am proud to have made the journey and done so with such great people to work with. This set design was truly a compilation of the course work I have taken at the school and the lessons that I learned during the process of designing *King Lear*.

Appendix A: Concept Research Images

**Plate 1**

I was influenced by the coloration of these stones at Stonehenge.

**Plate 2**

Stone slab with inscriptions. Both the coloring and the carvings caught my attention.

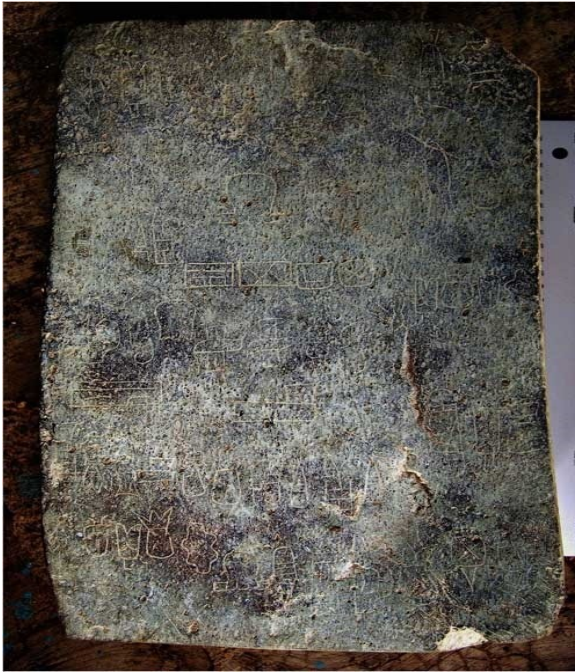


Plate 3 Central American stone slab with carving another influence on the coloration of the tops of the platforms



Plate 4 I was influenced by the grass growing in this Roman road.



Plate 5 Vercovicium Roman Fort walls that influenced my paint scheme.



Plate 6 Ruins of Hadrian's Wall that would influence the painting of the platform facings.



Plate 7 More ruins of Hadrian's Wall.



Plate 8 Lanterns that initially inspired the use of lanterns.



Plate 9

The rock carving that became the rake detail.

Appendix B: Drawings and Renderings

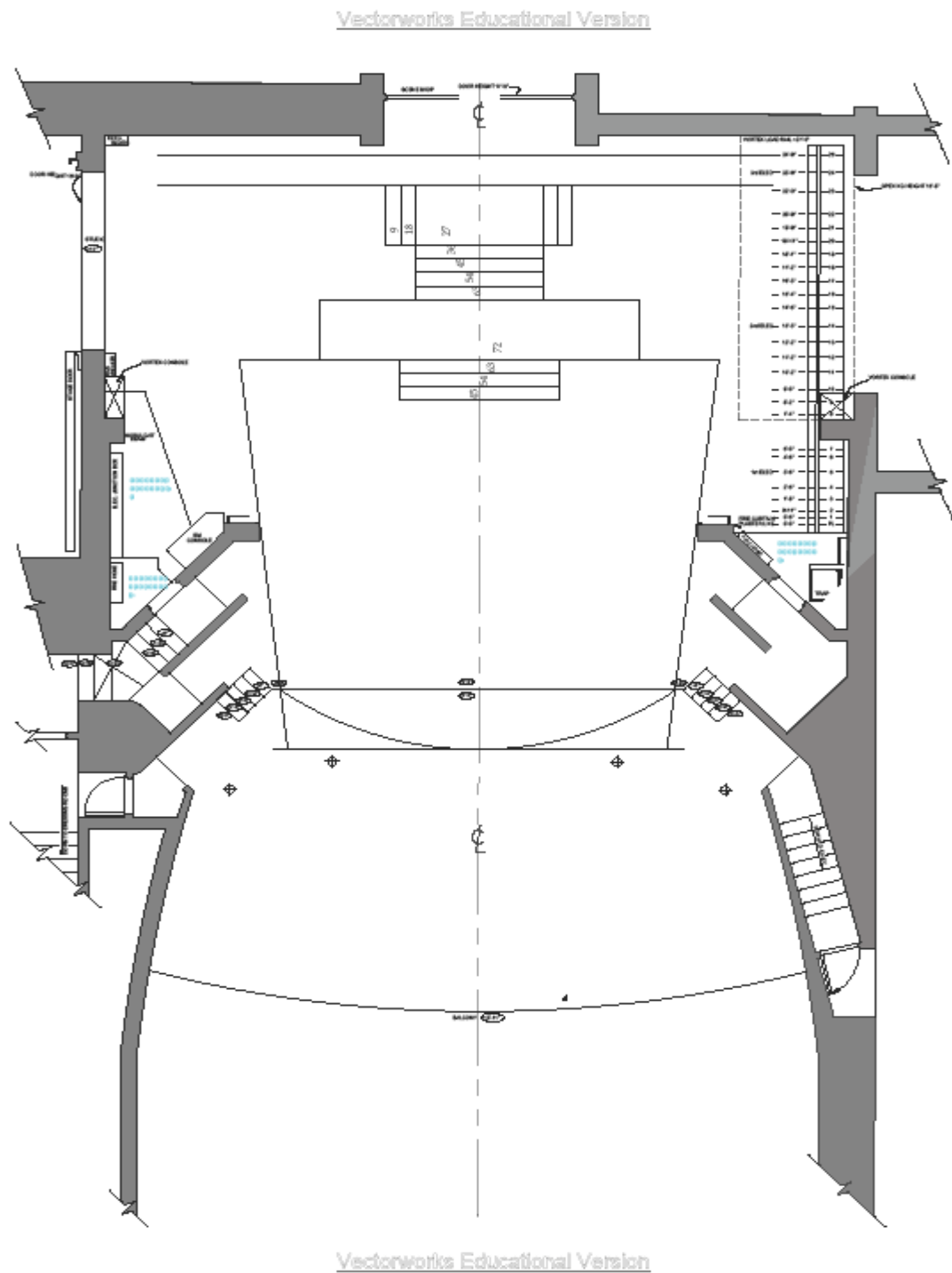


Plate 10

Floor plan study

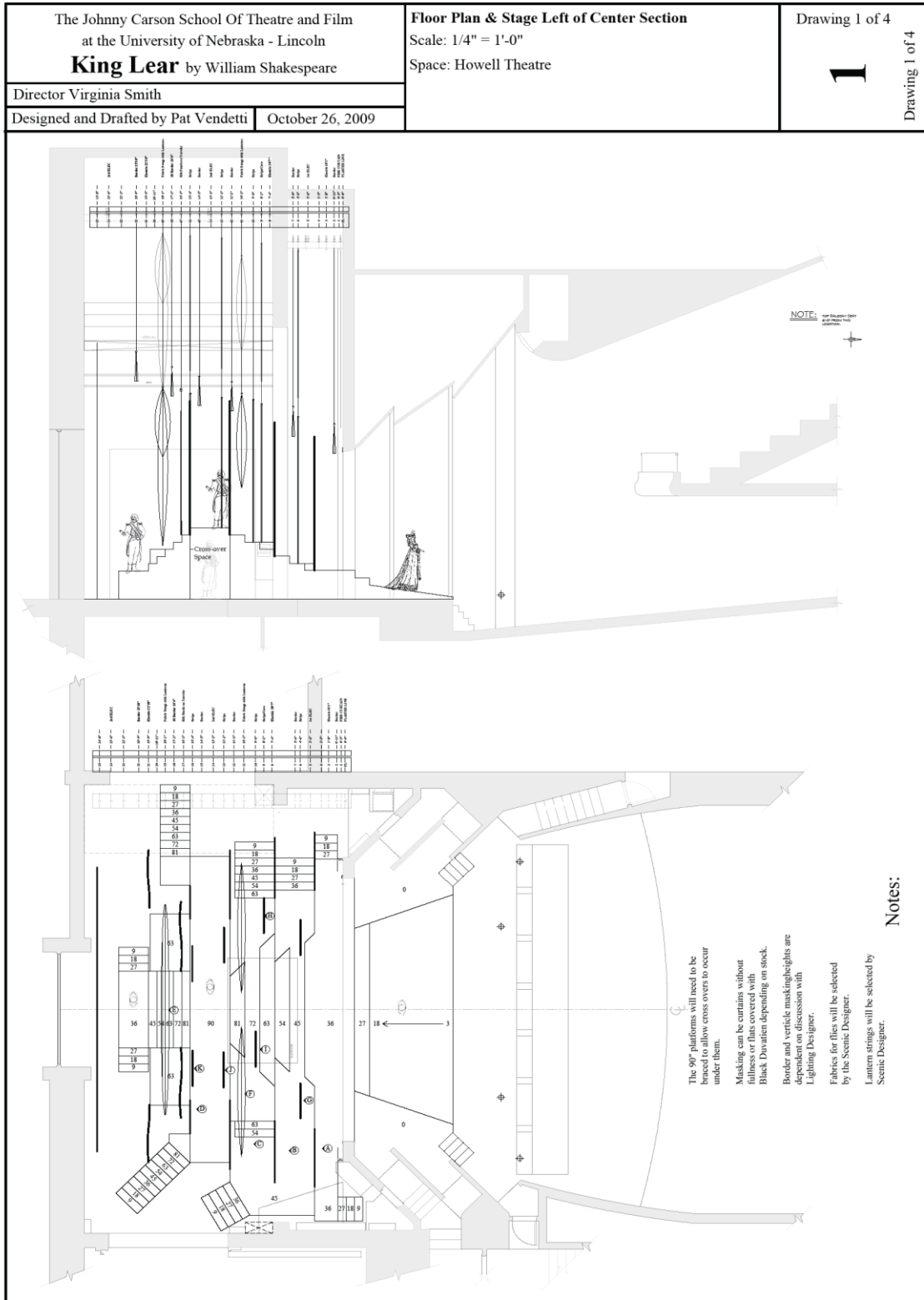


Plate 11

Final floor plan and section

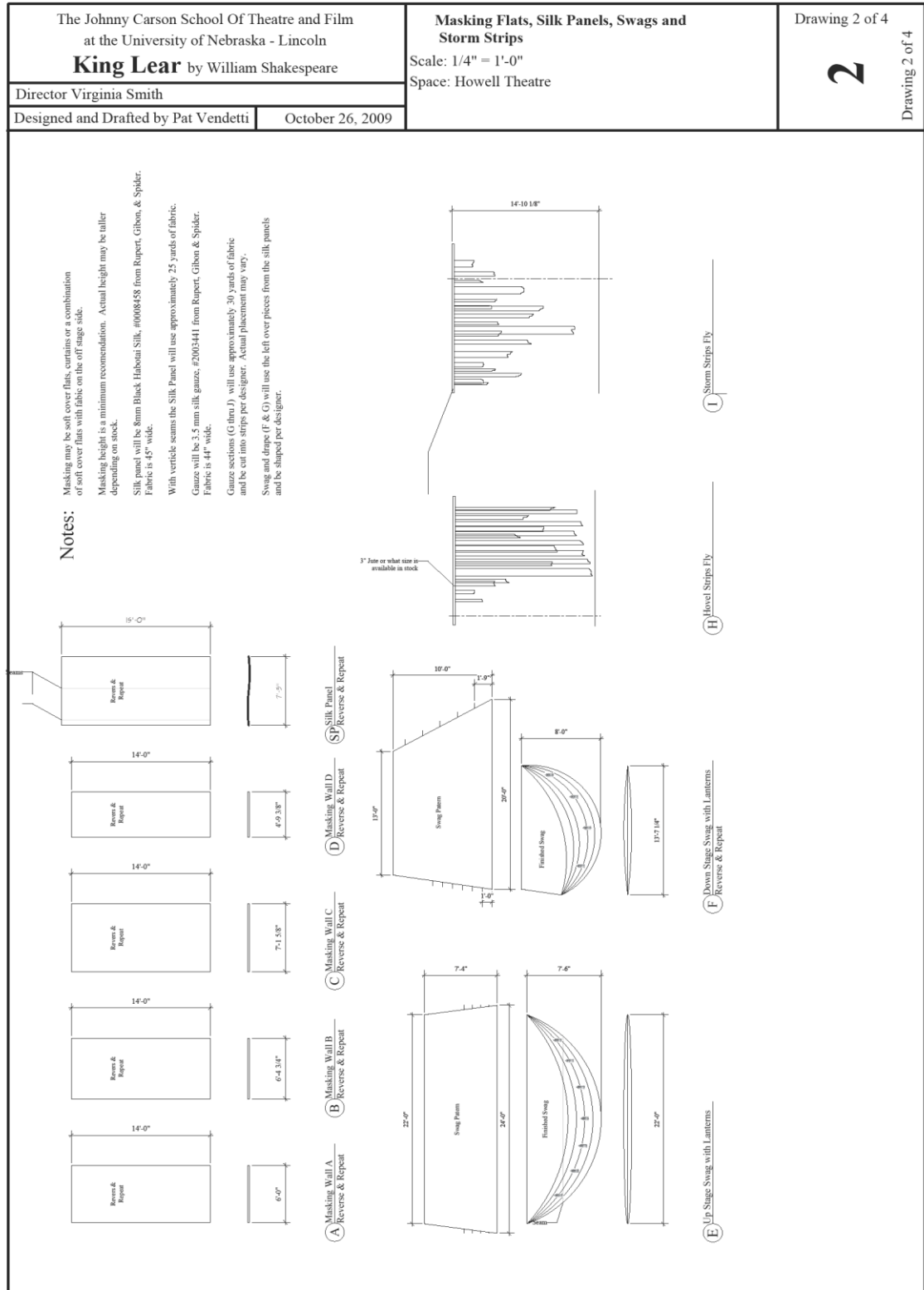


Plate 12

Final elevations masking and flies

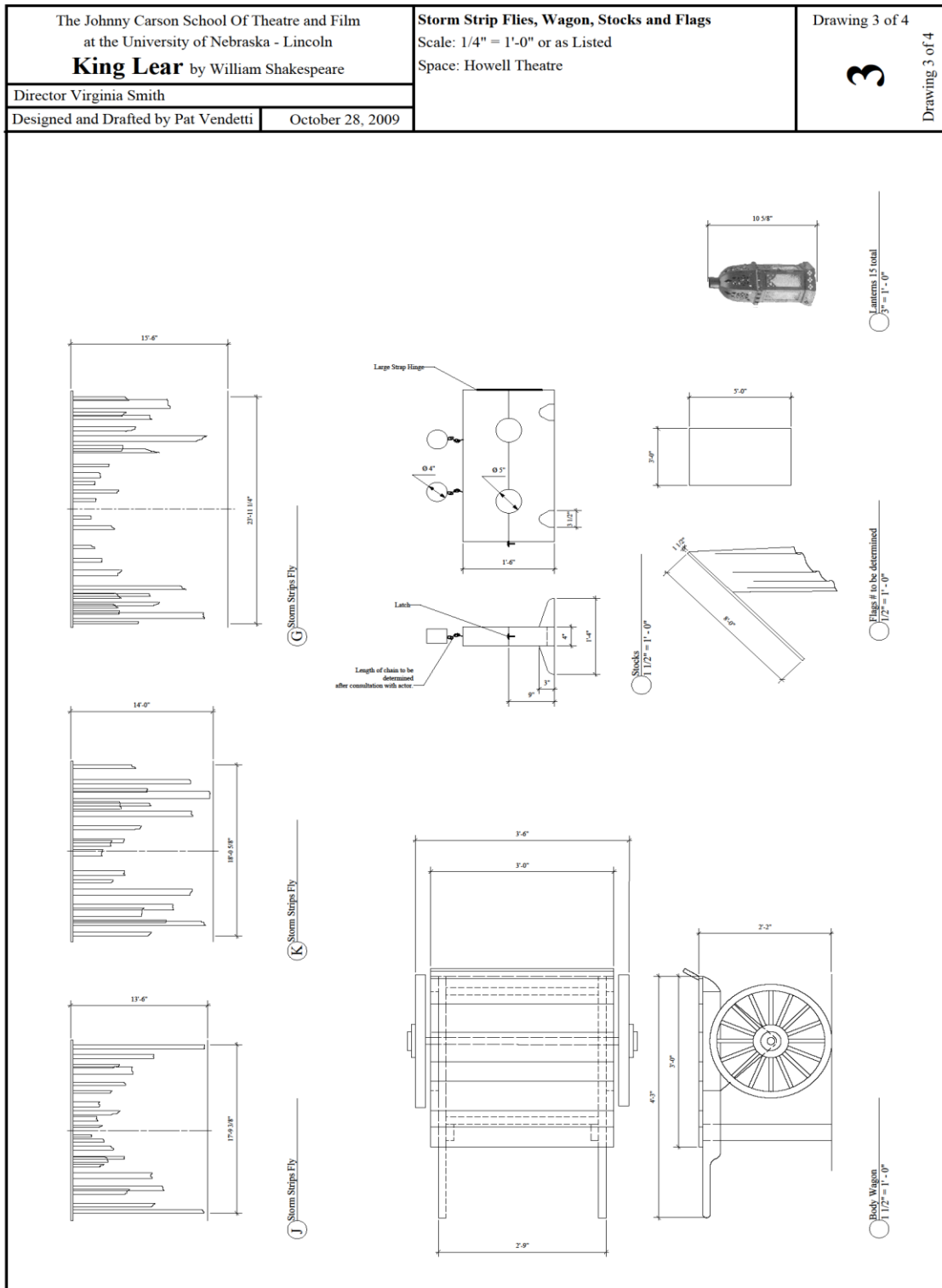


Plate13

Final elevations of flies and properties

| | | | |
|--|------------------|--|--|
| The Johnny Carson School Of Theatre and Film at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln King Lear by William Shakespeare | | Front Elevation Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0" Space: Howell Theatre | Drawing 3 of 4 4 Drawing 3 of 4 |
| Director Virginia Smith | | | |
| Designed and Drafted by Pat Vendetti | October 26, 2009 | | |

Plate 14

Front elevation

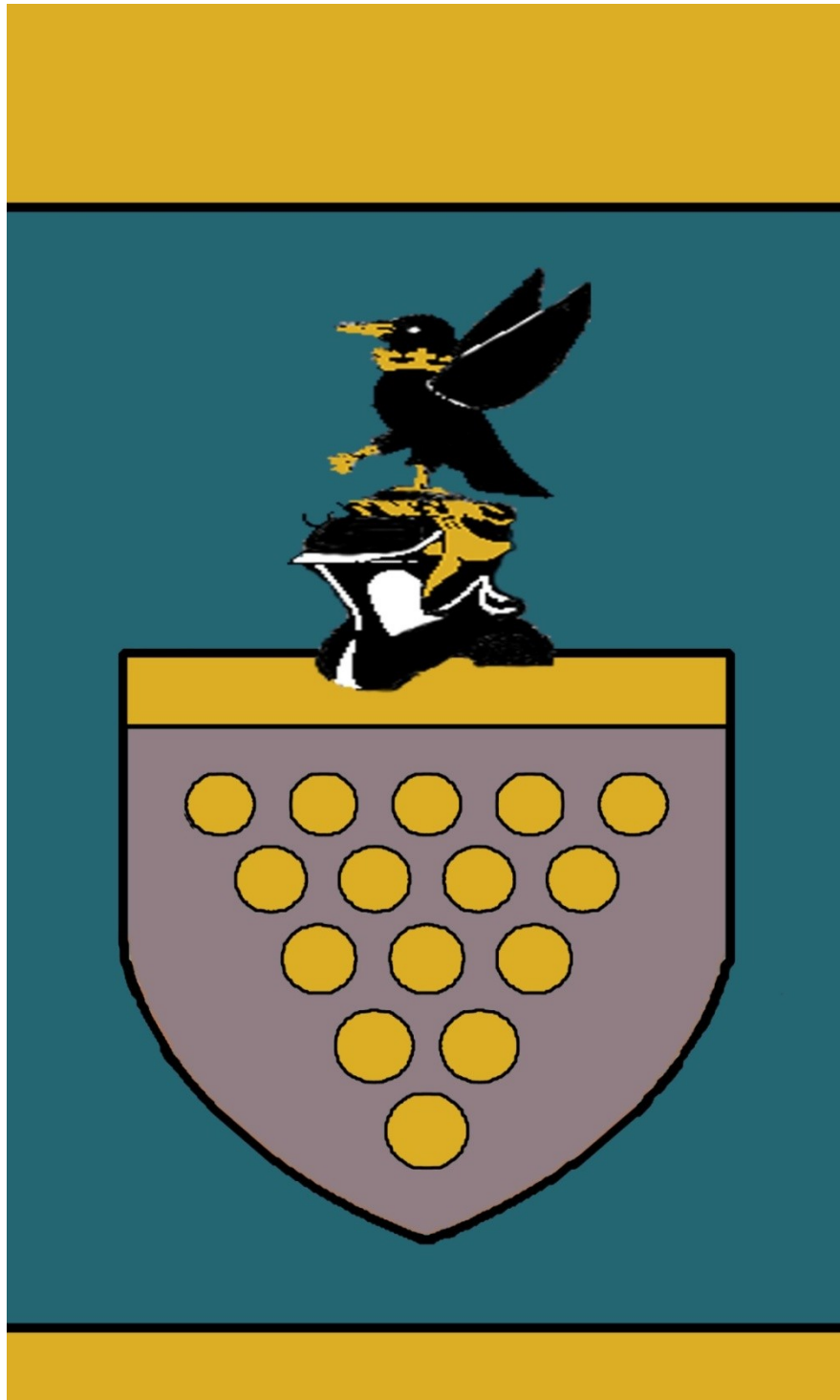


Plate 15

Original flag designed for Cornwall matching show costume colors and using historical symbols from the region.



Plate 16

Original flag designed for Albany matching show costume colors and using historical symbols from the region.



Plate 17

Original flag designed for the French matching show costume colors and using historical symbols from the region.



Plate 18

Map designed for King Lear's kingdom.



Plate 19

Paint Elevation of Platforms



Plate 20

Paint Elevation of Platform Facings

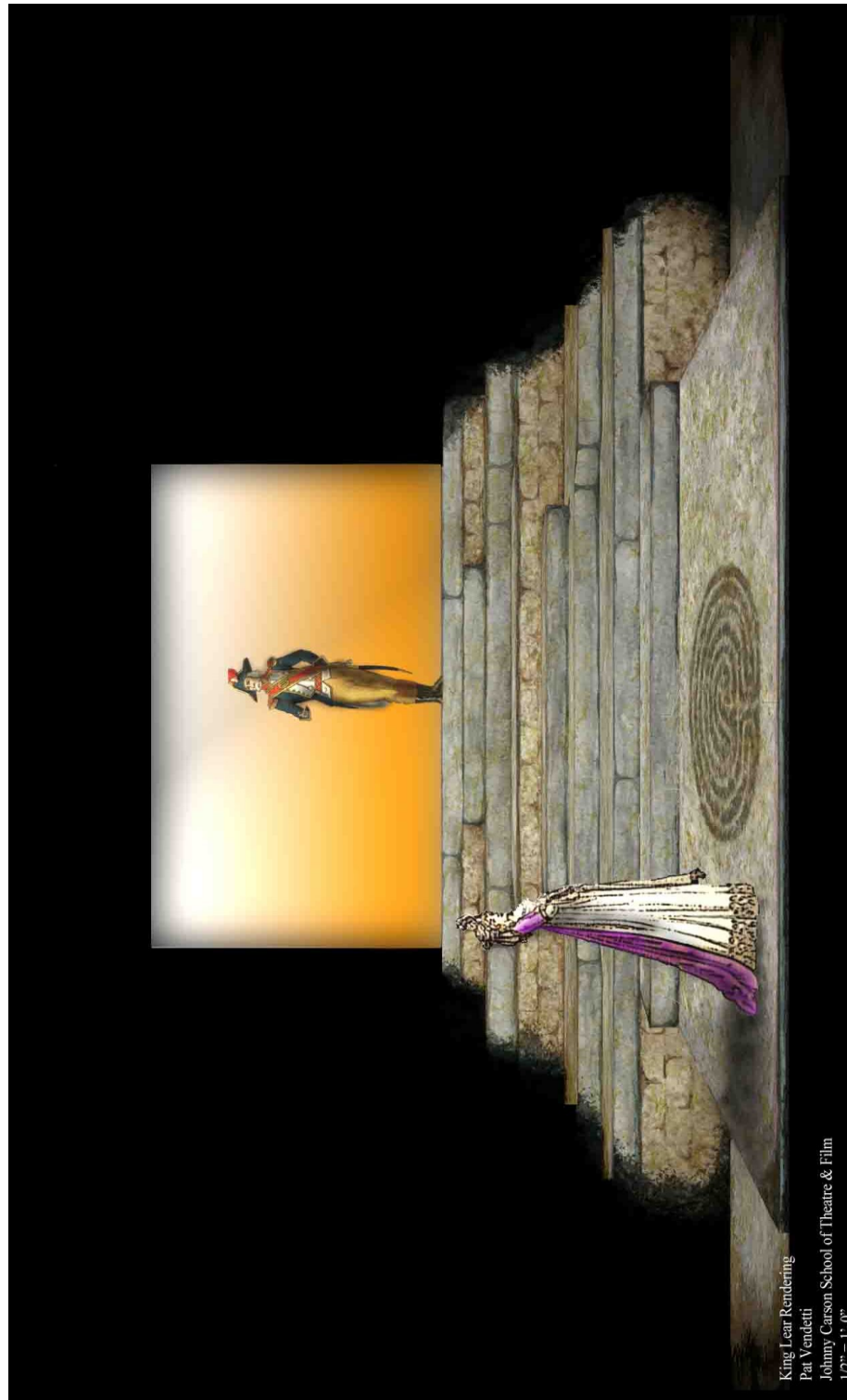


Plate 21

Perspective Rendering

Appendix C: Installation Images

**Plate 22**

Platforms waiting to be loaded into Howell Theatre

**Plate 23**

Stairs for the center reveal in the shop



Plate 24

Platforms being installed in the Howell Theatre

Appendix D: Show Images



Plate 25

Opening Scene Act I Scene 1



Plate 26

Act II Scene 4



Plate 27

Act III Scene 1



Plate 28

Act IV Scene 3



Plate 29

Final Scene Act V Scene 3



Plate 30

The End

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